The Monasteries of the Kurds in Syria in the Letter of the Archimandrites of Arabia, c. 570 CE

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Abstract

This paper explores the history of a Kurdish Christian community in the Roman province of Phoenicia Libanensis through a close reading of the Syriac *Letter of the Archimandrites of Arabia* (c. 570 CE). The findings contribute to our understanding of ethnic and religious diversity in Late Antique Syria and how Iranians engaged with Syriac Christianity. By contextualizing this letter within broader historical sources, the study further suggests that medieval Arabic legends attributing Arab origins to the Kurds may reflect historical memories of early contacts between Arab and Kurdish tribes.

Keywords — Kurds, Ghassanid Arabs, Iranians, Miaphysitism, Syriac Monasticism, Syria, Late Antiquity.

1. Introduction

The Syriac *Letter of the Archimandrites of Arabia*,[1] dated to 570 CE, is an important document recording a regional synod convened in the Roman province of Arabia in 569 or 570 CE to address the tritheist controversy.[2] The letter contains a formal declaration of faith sent to Orthodox (Miaphysite) bishops meeting in Constantinople. It is subscribed by 137 abbots representing monasteries mainly from the northern part of the province of Arabia, with some signatories from the provinces of Phoenicia Libanensis and Phoenicia Maritima.[3] Among the signatories we find representatives of monasteries explicitly identified as Kurdish (Syr. *Qūrdāyē* ܩܘܪܕܝܐ).[4] This makes the letter a rare and valuable witness to the presence of a Kurdish community in southern Syria in the 6th century CE.

[1] Preserved in London, British Library, MS Add. 14602.
[2] Valentina A. Grasso, *Pre-Islamic Arabia: Societies, Politics, Cults and Identities During Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 144.
[3] Jakob Ashkenazi, "Holy Man versus Monk—Village and Monastery in the Late Antique Levant: Between Hagiography and Archaeology", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57, 2014, 752–53.
[4] R. Payne Smith (ed.), *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879–1901), 3731. For the common names of Kurds in Syriac literature, see Pier Giorgio Borbone, *History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, edited, translated, and annotated by Pier Giorgio Borbone, translated from the Italian by Laura E. Parodi (Hamburg: Verlag Tredition, 2021), 316; Ray Jabre Mouawad, "The Kurds and Their Christian Neighbours: The Case of the Orthodox Syriacs," *Parole de l'Orient 17*, 1992, 128–130, 135.

The Syriac letter was first published by William Wright in 1870.[5] A French translation of the letter was published by Thomas Joseph Lamy in 1898.[6] Jean-Baptiste Chabot edited the Syriac text in 1907 and later produced a Latin translation in 1933.[7] Some of the information related to the Kurds was translated into English by Irfan Shahîd;[8] a complete English translation of the letter was published by Fergus Millar.[9] A Swedish translation was produced by Syriac scholar Jan Bet-Sawoce.[10] In this article, the Syriac texts are cited according to Chabot's edition (pp. 213–224), followed by transliterations. The translations are based on the aforementioned works as well as lexical information on Kurds in *Thesaurus Syriacus*, edited by R. Payne Smith.

2. Representatives of Kurdish Monasteries

Signature no. 8:

ܐܣܛܦܢܐ ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܫܠܡܢ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ. ܐܪܡܝܬ ܐܝܕܐ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܝ.[11]

ʾEsṭepānā qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā d-dayrā d-Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē. ʾArmēt ʾīdā b-kīrat ʾīdī.

Stephanus, priest and abbot of the monastery of Mār Shalmān of the Kurds. I have subscribed with my own hand.[12]

Signature no. 88:

ܝܘܚܢܢ ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܬܠܠܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ. ܐܪܡܝܬ ܐܝܕܐ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܗ ܕܡܪܝ ܕܚܠ ܠܐܠܗܐ ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܫ ܕܝܪܐ ܣܠܘܢܘܣ ܕܥܒܕܝܢ.[13]

Yōḥannān qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā d-dayrā d-Tellā d-Qūrdāyē. ʾArmīt ʾīdā b-kīrat ʾīdeh d-mār dāḥēl l-ʾAlāhā, qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā Salōnōs d-ʿAwdīn.

[5] William Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Acquired Since the Year 1838*, Part 2 (London: British Museum, 1870), 709–714.
[6] Th. J. Lamy, "Profession de foi, adressée par les abbés des convents de la province d'Arabie à Jacques Baradée," Ernest Leroux (publisher), *Actes du Onzième (Xle) Congrès des Orientalistes*, (Internationella Orientalistkongressen in the Elf), 1897, Del 4, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationle, 1898), 117–37.
[7] J. B. Chabot, *Documenta ad origins Monophysitarum illustrandas, CSCO 17, Scr. Syr. 17* (Paris: Typographeo Reipublicae, 1907), 213–224; Idem, *Documenta ad origins Monophysitarum illustrandas, CSCO 103, Scr. Syr. 52* (Leuven: Marcellus Istas, 1933), 145–156.
[8] Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century, vol .1, part 2: Ecclesiastical History* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), 830.
[9] Fergus Millar, "Christian Monasticism in Roman Arabia at the Birth of Mahomet," *Semitica et Classica* 2 (2009), 109–13
[10] Jan Beṯ-Şawoce (ed.), *Jakobiter. Vilka är de? Uppkomsten av dagens syrisk-ortodoxa kyrka. En historisk bakgrund*, vol. 1 (Södertälje: Nsibin, 2019), 41–56, the sections relevant to Kurds are available online at https://www.atour.com/forums/turkish/12.html, accessed January 2nd, 2026.
[11] Chabot, 1907, 214.
[12] Cf. R. Payne Smith, 4196; Lamy, 126; Chabot 1933, 148.
[13] Chabot 1907, 220.

Iohannes, priest and abbot of the Monastery of the Hill of the Kurds (dayrā d-Tellā d-Qurdāyē). I have subscribed by the hand of the God-fearing priest and abbot Silvanus of ʿAwdīn.[14]

Signature no. 90:

ܣܒܢܝܢܐ ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܡܪܝ ܐܠܝܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ. ܐܪܡܝܬ ܐܝܕܐ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܗ ܕܡܪܝ ܪܚܡ ܐܠܗܐ ܩܫܝܫܐ
ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܘܣܥܘܪܐ ܐܣܛܦܢܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܫܠܡܢ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ.[15]

Sabnīnā qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā d-Bēth Mār ʾĒliyā d-Qūrdāyē. ʾArmīt ʾīdā b-kīrat ʾīdē d-mār raḥem ʾAlāhā qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā w-saʿorā ʾEsṭepānā d-dayrā d-Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē.

Sabinianus, priest and abbot of the monastery of Bēth Mār Elias of the Kurds (Bēth Mār ʾĒliyā d-Qūrdāyē). I have subscribed by the hand of the God-loving priest, abbot, and visitor Mar Stephanus of the monastery of Mār Shalmān of the Kurds (dayrā d-Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē).[16]

Signature no. 92:

ܐܠܝܐ ܫܡܫܐ ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܢܘܣܐ. ܐܪܡܝܬ ܐܝܕܐ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܗ ܕܡܪܝ ܝܘܚܢܢ ܬܠܡܝܕܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܫܠܡܢ
ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ.[17]

ʾElyā shammāshā w-rēsh dayrā d-Nūsā. ʾArmīt ʾīdā b-kīrat ʾīdē d-Yōḥannān talmīdā d-dayrā d-Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē.

Elias, deacon and abbot of Nūsā. I have subscribed by the hand of Mar Iohannes, disciple of the Monastery of Mār Shalmān of the Kurds.[18]

Signature no. 93:

ܝܘܚܢܢ ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܦܘܠܐ ܕܣܟܝܐ. ܐܪܡܝܬ ܐܝܕܐ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܗ ܕܪܚܡ ܐܠܗܐ ܡܪܝ ܣܛܦܢܐ
ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܘܣܥܘܪܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܫܠܡܢ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ.[19]

Yōḥannān qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā d-dayrā d-Mār Pawlā d- Sakkayā. ʾArmīt ʾīdā b-kīrat ʾīdē d-raḥem ʾAlāhā Mār Sṭepānā qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā w-saʿorā d-dayrā d-Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē.

[14] Cf. R. Payne Smith, 4439; Lamy, 131; Chabot 1933, 153.
[15] Chabot 1907, 220–221.
[16] Cf. Lamy, 131; Chabot 1933, 153.
[17] Chabot 1907, 221.
[18] Cf. Lamy, 131; Chabot 1933, 153.
[19] Chabot 1907, 221.

Iohannes, priest and abbot of the monastery of Mar Paul of Sakkayā. I have subscribed by the hand of the God-loving Mar Stephanus, priest, abbot, and visitor of the Monastery of Mār Shalmān of the Kurds.[20]

Signature no. 95:

ܡܢܝܢ ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܓܘܒܝܐ ܕܒܩܘܪܕܝܐ. ܐܪܡܝܬ ܐܝܕܐ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܝ.[21]

Mānēs qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā d-dayrā d-Gūbāyē d-b-Qūrdāyē. ʾArmīt ʾīdā b-kīrat ʾīdī.

Manes, priest and abbot of the monastery of Gūbāyē among the Kurds (dayrā d-Gūbayē d-b-Qūrdāyē). I have subscribed with my own hand.[22]

Signature no. 99:

ܐܠܝܐ ܩܫܝܫܐ ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ ܟܬܒܬ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܝ ܝܘܢܐܝܬ.[23]

ʾEliyā qashīshā w-rēsh-dayrā d-dayrā d-Qūrdāyē. Ktabet b-kīrat ʾīdī Yawnāʾīt.

Elias, priest and abbot of the Monastery of the Kurds (dayrā d-Qūrdāyē). I subscribed with my own hand in Greek.[24]

Signature no. 112:

ܣܒܛ ܫܡܫܐ ܘܪܝܫܕܝܪܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܝܘܢܢ ܕܕܪܝܐ. ܐܪܡܝܬ ܐܝܕܐ ܒܟܝܪܬ ܐܝܕܗ ܕܡܪܝ ܝܘܚܢܢ ܬܠܡܝܕܐ ܕܕܝܪܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܡܪܝ ܫܠܡܢ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ.[25]

Sabaṭ shammāshā w- rēsh-dayrā d-dayrā d-Mār Yōnān d-Dārayyē. ʾArmīt ʾīdā b-kīrat īdē d-Mār Yōḥannān talmīdā d-dayrā d-Bēth Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē.

Sabbatius, deacon and abbot of the monastery of Mār Yōnān of Dārayyē, have subscribed by the hand of Mar Iohannes, disciple in the monastery of Bēth Mār Shalmān of the Kurds.[26]

3. Kurdish Monasteries

Evidence shows that Christianity had spread among the Kurds as early as the 5th century CE.[27] However, there was never a distinct Kurdish Christian liturgy or an independent

[20] Cf. Lamy, 131; Chabot 1933, 154; Shahîd, 830
[21] Chabot 1907, 221.
[22] Cf. Lamy, 131; Chabot 1933, 154.
[23] Chabot 1907, 222.
[24] Cf. Lamy, 132; Chabot 1933, 154; Shahîd, 830.
[25] Chabot 1907, 222.
[26] Cf. Lamy, 132; Chabot 1933, 155; Shahîd, 830.
[27] For Christianity among the Kurds see, A. I. Kolesnikov, "Khristianizatsiya Kurdov v Sasanidskom Irane III-VII vv. n. e. (po siriyskim istochnikam)", O. I. Zhigalina (ed.), *Lazarevskiye chteniya* 2 (Moskva: IV RAN 2013), 58–66; Marco Frenschkowski, "Christianity," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Strausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 465–66; J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne:*

Kurdish church owing to the relatively small number of Kurdish converts. Therefore the Kurdish Christians adhered to Syriac Christianity especially since they were introduced to the religion through Syriac Christians.[28] In this context, the *Letter of the Archimandrites of Arabia* is an important primary source that documents monasteries specifically belonging to the Kurds. The letter was first analyzed by Theodor Nöldeke in 1875 who focused primarily on identifying the toponyms mentioned in the monastic subscriptions. Concerning the references to the Kurds, Nöldeke suggested that it was "a settlement of Kurds probably from beyond the imperial border" who had entered Roman service.[29] Nöldeke returned to the question in 1898, saying that during the late Sasanian period "more precisely from the year 568, we have the place name Tellā d-Qurdāyē 'the Hill of the Kurds' near Damascus, so there was already a settlement of Kurds in Syria at that time, probably a military one."[30] In 1887, the Syriac scholar Iqlīmyus Yūsuf Dāwūd (1829–1890), a native of Amedi in Kurdistan and Archbishop of Damascus for the Syriac Catholic Church (1879-1890), emphasized the importance of this document for the ecclesiastical history of the Damascene region:

"In this letter, we have significant evidence of the abundance of Syriac monasteries in Damascus and its surroundings… in most of these regions, there were more than one monastery. Worth mentioning among these Syriac monasteries are the monasteries of the Hill of the Kurds (*ʾadīrat Tell al-ʾAkrād*), the hill that to this day bears the same name on the outskirts of Damascus. From this, it is evident that the Kurds were in Damascus before the 7th century."[31]

The Kurdish community (Syr. *Qūrdāyē* ܩܘܪܕܝܐ) in this area appears to have consisted of several closely connected villages organized around a shared monastic center known in Syriac as *Tellā d-Qūrdāyē* (ܬܠܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܐ) "the Hill of the Kurds",[32] located in the Roman province of Phoenice II (Phoenice Libanensis) in the Damascene region. The Syriac term *Qūrdāyē* (ܩܘܪܕܝܐ) "Kurds" appears in the subscriptions both as an ethnonym and as a designation for this locality (cf. nos. 88 & 99). In the latter case, according to Nöldeke, it was

Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du Nord de l'Iraq, vol. 1 (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1965), 216–217; Idem, *Saints Syriaques* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004), 163–4, cf. Muriel Debié, "Devenir chrétien dans l'Iran sassanide: la conversion à la lumière des récits hagiographiques", in S. Destephen, H. Inglebert et B. Dumézil (eds), *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique. Actes du colloque organisé à l'Université de Paris Ouest, les 26, 27 et 28 mai 2008* (Paris, 2010), 332; Basile Nikitine, "Les Kurdes et le christianisme," Ernest Leroux (ed.), *Revue de l'histoire des religions, Annales du musée Guimet*, vol. 85 (Paris, 1922), 147–156.

[28] Yaşar Kaplan, "Exploring Shared Poetic and Stylistic Forms between Kurdish and Syriac: Transcription and Translation of a Garshuni Poem by David of Barzane", *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1, 2023, 200.

[29] Theodor Nöldeke, "Zur Topographie Und Geschichte Des Damas Cenischen Gebietes Und Der Haurângegend." *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 29, no. 3/4, 1875, 424.

[30] Th. Nöldeke, "Kardū und Kurden", in O. Benndorf (Hg.), *Beiträge zur alten Geschichte und Geographie: Festschrift für Heinrich Kiepert* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1898), p. 79.

[31] Yūsuf Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-quṣārā fī ḥall thalāth masāʾil tārīkhīyah tatʿallaq bi-bilād al-Shām wa mā yujāwiruhā: wa-fīhi sharḥ ṭawīl fī ṭuqūs al-Masīḥīyah* (Beyrūt: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Adabīyah, 1887), 39.

[32] "Kurdenhügel", Nöldeke, "Kardū und Kurden", 79; "Collis Curdorum", R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 4439; "Tellae Curdorum", Chabot 1933, 153.

an abbreviation for Tellā d-Qūrdāyē.[33] In Arabic sources, the same locality is attested as *Tell Kurdī* "Kurdish Hill",[34] *Tell al-Kurdī*,[35] and *Tell al-ʾAkrād* "Hill of the Kurds",[36] located in eastern Ghūṭa about 14 km northeast of Damascus. As Th. J. Lamy noted, in the letter five monasteries are called "of the Kurds,"[37] represented by six signatories, as shown in the table below, all of which Nöldeke and Dāwūd localized in Tell Kurdī.

Table. 1. Monasteries of the Kurds in Phoenice Libanensis, Syria, c. 570 CE.

Sign. no.	Monastery	Monks and their ecclesiastical titles
8, 92, 93, 112	Monastery of Mār Shalmān of the Kurds (ܕܝܪܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܫܠܡܝ ܕܟܘܪܕܝܐ dayrā d-Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē); also called Monastery of Bēth Mār Shalmān of the Kurds (ܕܝܪܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܚܙܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܫܠܡܝ ܕܟܘܪܕܝܐ dayrā d-Bēth Mār Shalmān d-Qūrdāyē).	Mar Stephanus, priest (*qashīshā*) and abbot (*rēsh dayrā*); Iohannes, disciple (*talmīdā*).
88	Monastery of the Hill of the Kurds (ܕܝܪܐ ܕܬܠܐ ܕܟܘܪܕܝܐ dayrā d-Tellā d-Qūrdāyē)	Iohannes, priest (*qashīshā*) and abbot (*rēsh dayrā*)
90	Monastery of Bēth Mār Elias of the Kurds (ܕܝܪܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܚܙܐ ܕܡܪܝ ܐܠܝܐ ܕܟܘܪܕܝܐ dayrā d-Bēth Mār ʾĒliyā d-Qūrdāyē)	Sabinianus, priest (*qashīshā*) and abbot (*rēsh dayrā*)
95	Monastery of Gūbāyē among the Kurds (ܕܝܪܐ ܕܓܘܒܝܐ ܒܟܘܪܕܝܐ dayrā d-Gūbāyē d-b-Qūrdāyē)	Manes, priest (*qashīshā*) and abbot (*rēsh dayrā*)
99	Monastery of the Kurds (ܕܝܪܐ ܕܟܘܪܕܝܐ dayrā d-Qūrdāyē)	Elias, priest (*qashīshā*) and abbot (*rēsh dayrā*)

[33] Nöldeke 1875, 424; Robert Hoyland, "Late Roman Provincia Arabia, Monophysite monks and Arab tribes: A Problem of Centre and Periphery," *Semitica et Classica* 2, 2009, 134.
[34] Nöldeke 1875, 424; Lamy 1898, 137.
[35] René Dussaud, *Topographie historique de la Syrie antique et medieval* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1927), 312.
[36] Dāwūd, 39.
[37] Lamy, 137.

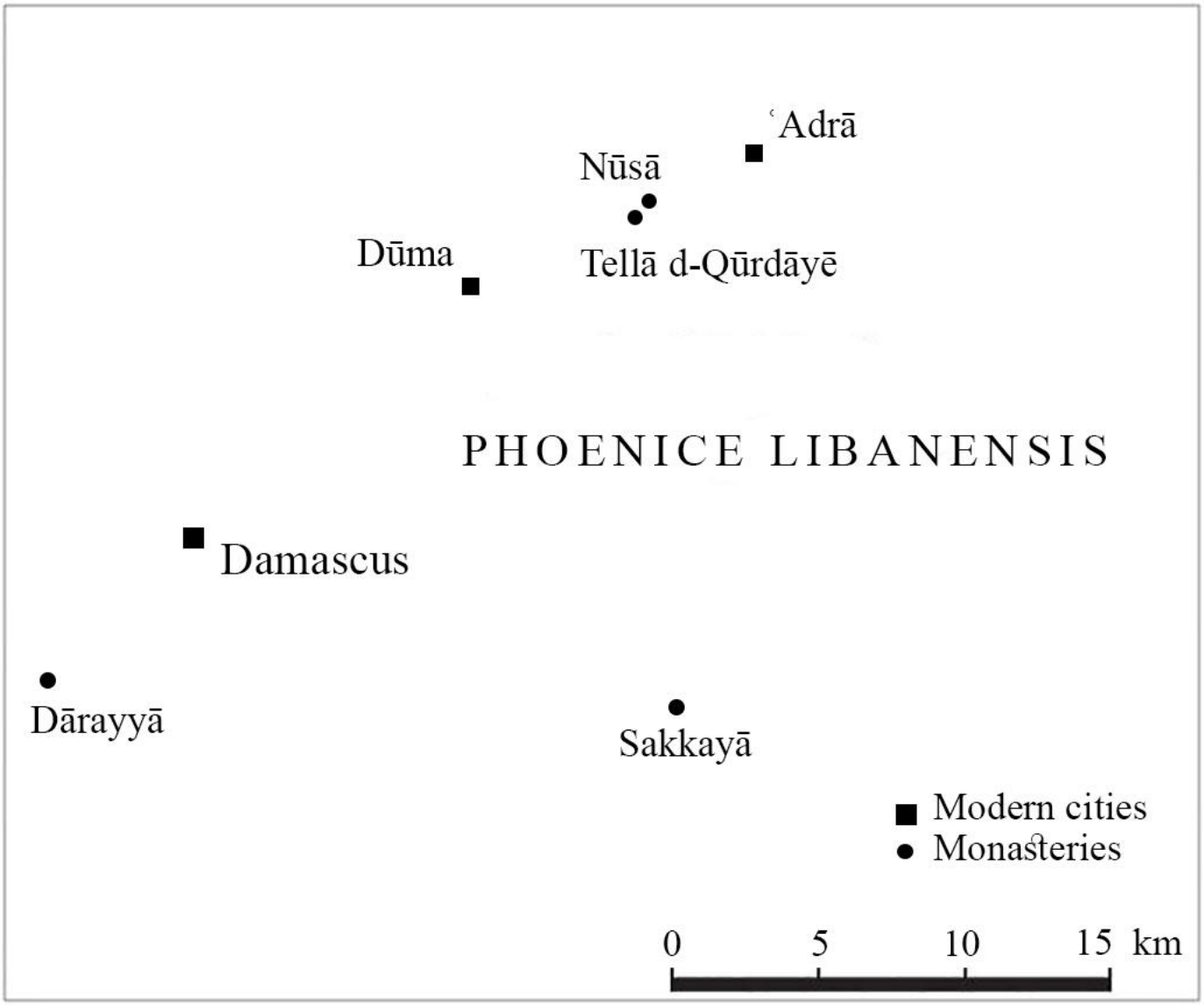

Fig. 1. The location of Tellā d-Qūrdāyē, modern Tell Kurdī, in the province of Phoenicia Libanensis. The map is adapted, with slight modifications, from Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century, Vol. 2, Part 1, Toponymy, Monuments, Historical Geography, and Frontier Studies* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 2002), 441; see also Robert Hoyland, "Late Roman Provincia Arabia, Monophysite monks and Arab tribes: A Problem of Centre and Periphery," 122.

The settlement and its name survived into the medieval period, the Damascene scholar Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 1546 CE) lists Tell Kurdī (تل كردي) among the villages of Ghūṭa,[38] although by that time its Kurdish population had probably disappeared or assimilated into the surrounding Arab population. It is worth mentioning, however, a late medieval Melkite Syriac manuscript was examined by "the priest Fāris al-Kurdī, son of the late Tūmā, son of the late Sulaymān, son of the late Dāwūd, and Sarkīs son of Tūmā son of Maʿmar, in the year 1563." Both

[38] Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī, *Ghūṭat Dimashq* (Damascus: Maṭbaʿat al-Taraqqī, 1952), 21.

priests were from Ṣaydnāyā, located near Damascus.[39] Whether the Christian individual bearing the *nisba* "the Kurd" was a descendant of the earlier Kurdish Christian community or a later convert remains uncertain.

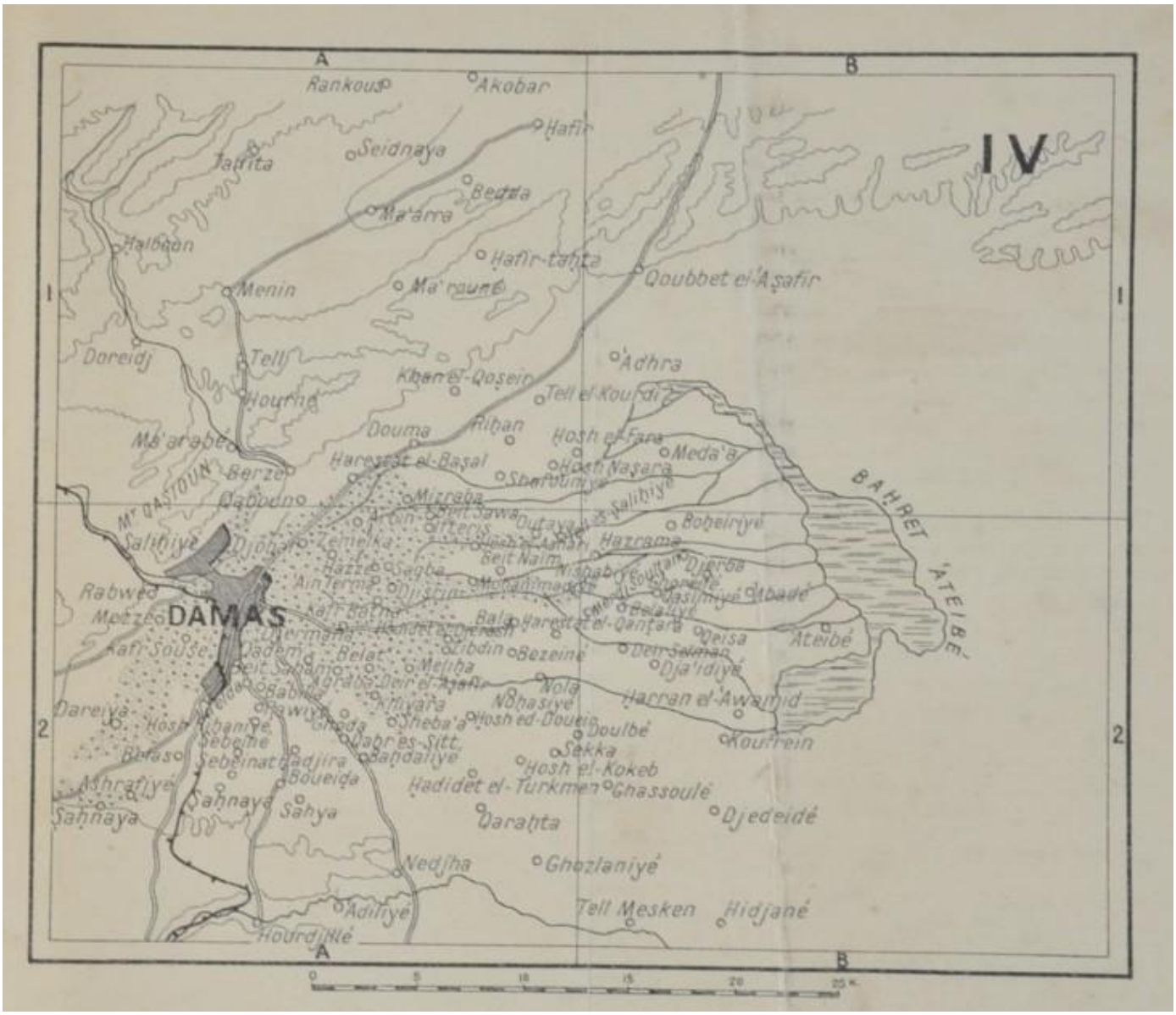

Fig. 2. Tell Kurdī in Damascus region. ©R. Dussaud, map IV A1, 1927, 76–77, accessed online, January 8th, 2026, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1290563c/f143.

[39] Ḥabīb Zayyāt, *Khabāyā al-zawāyā min tārīkh Ṣaydnāyā*. Wathāʾiq tārīkhiyya li-l-Kursī al-Malakī al-Anṭākī 3 (Ḥarīṣā: Maṭbaʿat al-Qiddīs Būlus, 1932), 21–22.

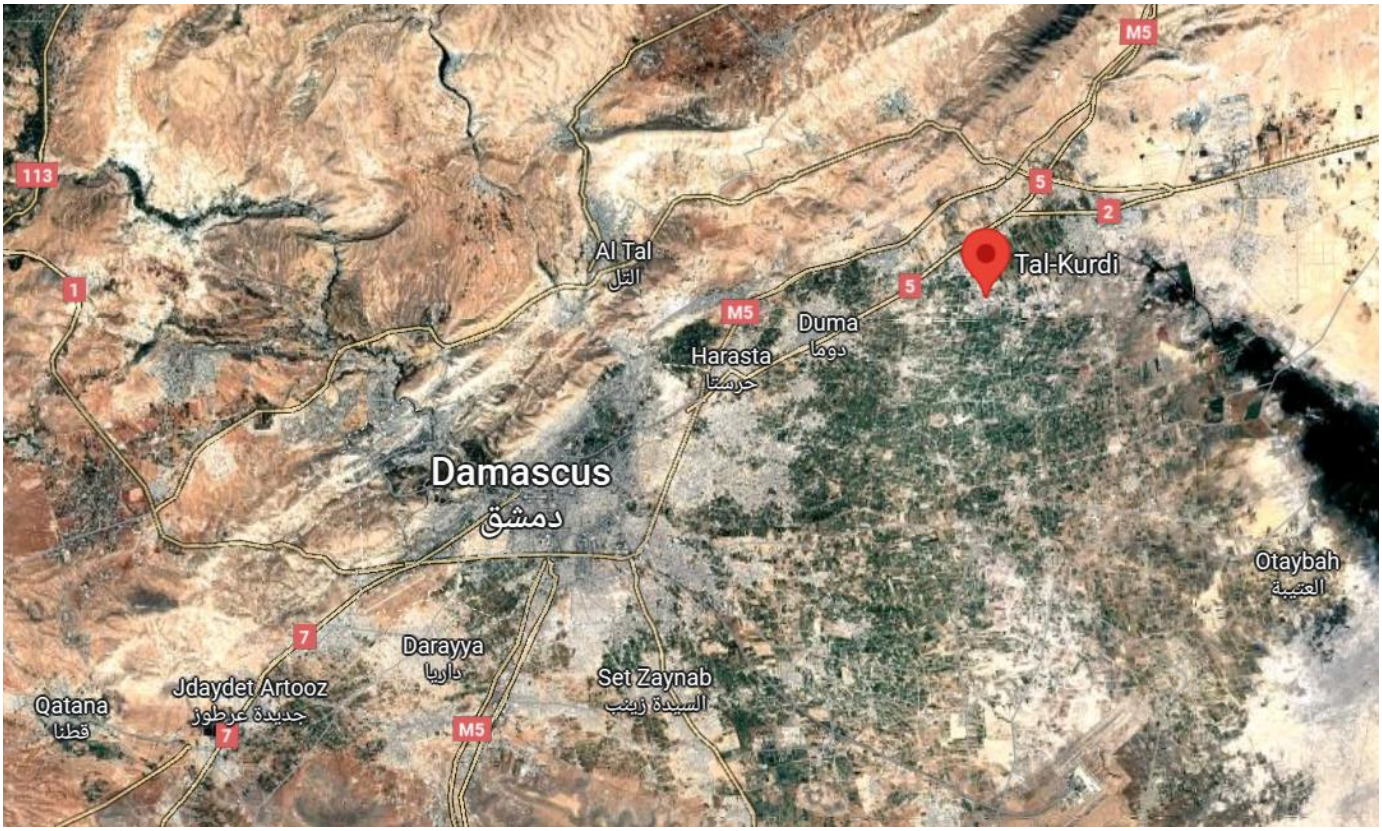

Fig. 3. Satellite view of Tell Kurdī. ©Google Maps, accessed online, January 8th, 2026, https://maps.app.goo.gl/mHVF2FhQ5KPVWyLv9.

4. Kurds and Ghassanid Arabs

The region under discussion during the Roman-Sasanin periods in Late Antiquity was predominantly inhabited by Christianized Arab tribes, the Ghassanids, who served as Roman *foederati* along the eastern frontier, and other Semitic groups such as Arameans and Jews. The explicit mention of Kurds in the letter shows that they were recognized as a distinct community within a largely Semitic population. Although the circumstances of their arrival in the Damascus region is unclear, the Kurds had been settled there long enough to give their ethnic name to local toponyms, abandon their Iranian religion, and convert to Christianity. We now turn to the available evidence to reconstruct the historical background of this community.

The earliest indications of contact between Kurds and Ghassanid Arabs of Syria appear in the account of Ghassanid incursions into Sasanian territory during the reign of Shāpūr II (r. 309–379 CE). According to Ferdowsī's *Shāhnāma*, apparently drawing ultimately on Middle Iranian sources, the Ghassanid leader Ṭāʾir led a large coalition force comprised of various ethnic groups, and plundered the environs of Ctesiphon, capital of the Sasanian empire:

ze Ghasāniyān Ṭāʾir-e shīr-del
ke dādī falak rā be shamshīr-e del
sepāhī ze Rūmī o az Qādsī
ze Baḥrain o az Kurd o az Pārsī

biyāmad be pīrāman-e Tīsfūn
sepāhash ze andāz dānesh fazūn
(Ferdowsī*, Shāhnāmeh*, 1386 [2007], 6/293)[40]

"From the Ghassanids came Ṭāʾir the lion-hearted, who challenged the heavens with the sword of his courage, he brought an army from the Romans, Cadusians[41], Baḥrainis[42], Kurds, and Persians. He came to the surroundings of Ctesiphon with an army beyond calculation."[43]

Shāpūr eventually defeated the Ghassanids and pursued Ṭāʾir as far as Yemen. Perso-Arabic sources preserve alternative versions of these events. Al-Dīnawarī, for example, attributes the Ghassanid attack not to Ṭāʾir but to al-Ḍayzan al-Ghassānī, whom he identifies as ruler of al-Ḥīra. Dīnawarī also distinguishes between raids conducted by Arab groups from Baḥrain and Basra region and the Ghassanid attacks originating from the Ǧazīra (Mesopotamia), however, without mentioning the ethnic makeup of al-Ḍayzan's army. In this version, Shāpūr launches a punitive campaign against the Ǧazīra and treats its population harshly. Al-Ḍayzan is subsequently besieged in a fortified city on the Euphrates, opposite the region of al-Raqqa.[44]

Based on these narratives, Ghassanids and Kurds were in contact in Ǧazīra in the fourth century CE. Other contemporary evidence shows that the Kurdish tribe Māhkard had established a principality in Upper Ǧazīra, present-day Bohtān, during the late fourth century.[45] The early contacts between Kurds and Ghassanids may also help explain the

[40] cf. Saeid Ebadijamil and Hossein Bayat, "Dark-i nādurust-i maʿnā-yi «Kord» dar Shāhnāmeh," *Kāvoshnāmeh* 21 (46), 2020, 205.

[41] The name *Qādsī* in this context probably does not mean "from Qādsiyya" but rather refers to the Cadusians who are called *Kadoúsioi* (Καδούσιοι) in Greek and *Qadīšāyē* (ܩܕܝܫܝܐ) in Syriac. In medieval Perso-Arabic sources, they appear under various forms such as *Qādūsīān* (cf. Spuler, Bertold, *Iran in the Early Islamic Period: Politics, Culture, Administration and Public Life between the Arab and the Seljuk Conquests, 633–1055*, Leiden: Brill, 2014, 299). Ibn Khurradādbih mentions a certain Kādhsh Shāh among those to whom Ardashir conceded the title *Shāh*, he was probably the ruler of the Cadusians (cf. Ibn Khurradādbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-al-mamālik*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum 6. Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1889, 17), *Qādsī* in the *Shāhnāmeh* seems to be the Arabicized form of Iranian **Kādshī*. According to a genealogical tradition preserved by al-Nuwayrī (d. 1333 CE): "The descendants of Ahlū, son of Iram, son of Sām, are the Qādsān. And the descendants of Akrād are the ancestors of the tribe known as the Kurds, according to the view of most genealogists" (cf. al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-ʿArab fī funūn al-ʾadab*, vol. 2, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah, 1923, 290).

[42] Paul Kunitzsch, "Baḥrain in a Description by Aḥmad Ibn Mājid, AD 1490," in A. Al-Khalifa & M. Rice (eds.), *Bahrain through the Ages* (London: Routledge, 1993), 388: "In the older Arabic sources, the island known today as Bahrain was usually given the individual name of Awāl while the name al-Baḥrayn generally referred to all the land in East Arabia that lies between Basra and Oman."

[43] See also Dick Davis (trans.), *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* (NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 686

[44] al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, ed. ʿUmar Fārūq al-Ṭabbāʿ (Bayrūt: Dār al-Arqam b. Abī al-Arqam, 2016), 47–48; cf. Parvaneh Pourshariati, *"*The Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl of Abū Ḥanīfa Dīnawarī*:* A Shuʿūbī Treatise on Late Antique Iran," *Sources for the History of Sasanian and Post-Sasanian Iran*, ed. by Rika Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 2010a), 224 & 231; Al-Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin wal-masāwiʾ* (ed. Beirut, 1970), 564 (= ed. Friedrich Schwally, 604–5), cf. Geert Jan van Gelder, *Classical Arabic Literature A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 114–115.

[45] Josef Marquart, *Südarmenien und die Tigrisquellen: nach griechischen und arabischen Geographen* (Wien: Mechitharisten-Buchdruckerei, 1930), 376–80; Vladimir Minorsky, "Les origines des Kurdes," in *Actes du XXe Congrès international des orientalistes, Bruxelles 5–10 Septembre 1938* (Louvain: Bureaux du muséon, 1940), 151; Basile Nikitine, *Les Kurdes: Étude Sociologique et Historique* (Paris: Imprimérie nationale, 1956), 11–12.

emergence of medieval Arabic traditions that trace Kurdish origins to Arabs. Al-Masʿūdī (d. 956 CE),[46] who reports that Kurds lived in Syria in his own time, and al-Bakrī (d. 1094 CE)[47] both preserve Arab legends according to which the Kurds had separated from the Arab stock in ancient times (*fī qadīm al-zamān*) as a result of feuds with the Ghassanids (*li-waqāʾiʿ wa-dimāʾ kānat baynahum wa-bayna Ghassān*), and, having retired to the mountains, intermingled with Iranians (*al-Aʿāğim wa al-Furs*) and forgot the Arabic language.[48] According to another elaborate legend handed down in the work of Ǧād b. Sinān al-Ḥimyarī on the *Ǧinn*, transmitted by Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. 1432 CE), the progenitor of the Kurds was the son of Ghassanid prince ʿAmr, who was passionately devoted to hunting, and a female *ǧinniya* named Shamshāṭa, daughter of Dalhām al-Ṣaḥābī, a *ǧinn* who had rebelled against Solomon. Shamshāṭa first appears to ʿAmr in the form of a gazelle with golden horns, abducts him, and carries him to her distant realm where she marries him. She eventually allows him a brief return to the human world, but a trap set by his brothers ensnares the pregnant Shamshāṭa. ʿAmr spares her life on the condition that she grants him eternal freedom. Shamshāṭa and ʿAmr's son is born after a seven or ten year pregnancy on Mount Hakkār (in Kurdistan). Immediately after birth, the child springs (*karrada*) to his feet, he was therefore named Kurd who became the ancestor of the Kurds.[49]

The Arab origin of Kurds is not a historical fact as they are an Iranian people, however, these legends probably reflect historical memories of coexistence between Kurdish and Arab tribes. In addition to these legends, other traditions may preserve more concrete memories of an early Kurdish presence in the southern Levant. Arab historian al-Bakrī, who cites Persian geographer and vizier al-Ǧayhānī (d. 925 CE) and other authors as sources for this information (*wa-qad dhakarahu Abū Naṣr al-Ǧayhānī wa-ghayruhu*) says that: "And the original abode of the Kurds, where they first originated, is located between the land of Judea, which is in the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula" (*wa-mawḍiʿ al-Kurd alladhī fīhi awwaluhum mā bayna arḍ Yahūdhā min arḍ al-Shām wa-mā bayna Ǧazīrat al-ʿArab*).[50] The *Risāla* of Ibn García (d. 1084) claims that the Christian Arab tribe of Banū Salīḥ, that lived in southern Syria during the Roman–Sasanian period and was ultimately defeated by the Ghassanids, had intermarried with "the Kurds and Nabateans, the Abyssinians and Egyptians."[51]

In sum, the evidence points to early contacts between Kurdish and Arab tribal groups, particularly Ghassanids. The Kurds attested in southern Syria may have arrived either as migratory tribes from Upper Ǧazīra, facilitated by their amicable relations with the Arab

[46] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-ǧawhar*, vol. 2 (Bayrut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2012), 133.
[47] Abū ʿUbayd al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik waʾl-mamālik*, ed. A. P. van Leeuwen & André Ferré, vol. I (Tunis: al-Dār al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1992), 343–44.
[48] Cf. Vladimir Minorsky, "Kurds," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1927; repr. 1993), 1134.
[49] Abū Bakr b. ʿAbdallāh b. Aybak Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa-ǧāmiʿ al-ghurar*, vol. 5, ed. by Dorothea Krawulsky (Cairo 1992), 42–44. Cf. Ulrich Haarmann, "Alṭun Ḫān und Čingiz Ḫān bei den ägyptischen Mamluken," *Der Islam*, vol. 51, no. 1, 1974, 1–36, esp. 11–13.; Idem, "Turkish Legends in the Popular Historiography of Medieval Egypt," *Proceedings of the VIth Congress of Arabic and Islamic Studies: Visby 13–16 August, Stockholm 17–19 August 1972* (Stockholm and Leiden, 1975), 101.
[50] al-Bakrī, *al-Masālik waʾl-mamālik*, 344.
[51] James T. Monroe (trans.), *Shuʿubiyya in al-Andalus: The Risāla of Ibn García and Five Refutations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 45.

tribes, or as troops in the Roman or Persian armies.[52] Kurdish tribes migrated westward from the Iranian mountains during the Sasanian period. Kurdish presence in Upper Ǧazīra during Late Antiquity is confirmed by Christian sources that record the conversion of Kurds,[53] and by *futūḥ* narratives. During the conquest of Mosul and Ǧazīra in the 640s CE, Arab armies led by ʿIyāḍ b. Ghanm or ʿUtba b. Farqad captured "all the fortresses of the Kurds" (*ǧamīʿ maʿāqil al-ʾAkrād*).[54] Kurdish presence is also reflected in local toponyms, the Arab historian Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 897 CE) lists among the districts (*kūra*) of Ǧazīra Balad, Bāzabdī, Ǧazīrat al-ʾAkrād ("the Island of the Kurds," probably Ǧazīrat Ibn ʿUmar), Bāʿr Bābā, Sinǧār, and Kafr Tūthā.[55] An earlier Syriac source, the Kāmed inscription dated to 96 AH (714–715 CE), refers to the same area as *Gezīrat Kūrdū* (ܓܙܝܪܬ ܟܘܪܕܝ) "the Kurdish island."[56]

5. Intra-communal and Inter-communal Relations

The archimandrites of Kurdish monasteries, like the other archimandrites, signed the letter in Syriac with the exception of one monk, Elias (no. 99), who signed in Greek, showing that the monks were familiar not only with Syriac but also with Greek. The onomasticon of the archimandrites further reflects the cultural diversity of the region: biblical Hebrew names (Eliyā, Yōḥannān) and other Semitic names common among Arabs and Syriac Christians (e.g. Shalmān),[57] Greek (Stephanus), Roman (Sabinianus), and Iranian or Iranized names such as Manes, which is the Latinized version of Mānī, of Iranian or Semitic origin.[58] However, these were common Christian names of the period and their diversity only suggests that southern Syria was influenced by various cultures. The letter also indicates that there were strong ties among monasteries of the Kurds, for instance, Sabinianus of Bēth Mār Elias of the Kurds signed on behalf of Mar Stephanus of the monastery of Mār Shalmān of the Kurds (no. 90). At the same time, monks of the monasteries of the Kurds maintained close ties with neighboring monastic communities: Mar Stephanus signed on behalf of

[52] For Kurds in the Sasanian army, see ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar ibn ʿAlī al-Bayḍāwī, *Niẓām al-tawārīkh*, ed. Mīr Hāshim Muḥaddith (Tehrān: Bunyād-i Mawqūfāt-i Duktur Maḥmūd Afshār, 1382 /2003), 37; Rashīd al-Dīn Hamadānī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*, Ms. Edinburgh University Library, Arab 20, c. 1306 -1315 CE, fol. 26r; Ibn Balkhī, *The Fársnáma of Ibnu'l-Balkhí*, ed. by Guy Le Strange and Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1921), 166.

[53] *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*, translated from Syriac by Philip Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 152 & 223; Jeffrey Haines, *Mosul's Hinterland: Village and Monastery in Early Islamic Iraq* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2022), 153–54.

[54] Balādhurī (d. 892 CE), *Futūḥ al-buldān*, Yale Landberg MSS 33, fol. 68r; al-Hamadhānī (fl. 903 CE), *Mukhtaṣar kitāb al-buldān*, SBB, Ms. 6035, fol. 21v; Qudāma b. Ǧaʿfar (d. 948 CE), *al-Kharāǧ wa-ṣanʿat al-kitāba*, BnF, Ms. Arabe 5907, fol. 191r.

[55] Al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 897 CE), *al-Masālik wa al-mamālik,* cited by bn Shaddād (d. 1285 CE), *al-Aʿlāq al-khaṭīrah fī dhikr umara' al-Shām wa al-Ǧazīrah*, 112.

[56] Kāmid inscription, c. 96 AH /714 – 715 CE, cf. P. Mouterde, "Inscriptions en syriaque dialectal à Kāmed (Beqʿa)," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 22 (1939), 82–84.

[57] See for instance Shalmān, an East Syrian who decided to take up arms and form a small army to counter the incursions of Kurdish tribal marauders called Kartwāye. Cf. E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of Governors*, vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1893), 524.

[58] Werner Sundermann, "Mani", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2009, accessed January 8th, 2026, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mani-founder-manicheism/

monastery of Mār Paul of Sakkayā (no. 93) where he was a visitor (Syr. *saʿorē*, Gk. *periodeutes*),[59] Mar Iohannes signed on behalf the Monastery of Nūsā (no. 92) and the monastery of Mār Yōnān in Dārayyē (no. 86). On the other hand, Silvanus of ʿAwdīn signed on behalf of the Monastery of the Hill of the Kurds (no. 88).

Conclusion

The Letter of the Archimandrites of Arabia provides the earliest direct reference to Kurds in Syria in the 6th century. By this period, the Kurdish community had converted to Miaphysite Christianity and become well integrated into the monastic networks of southern Levant while preserving a distinct communal identity. The concentration of five monasteries in and around Tellā d-Qūrdāyē (Tell Kurdī) further indicates the community was established long enough to leave toponymic traces in the region.

The 4th century account of Ghassanid raids involving Kurdish contingents points to established contacts between these groups in Ǧazīra. It remains uncertain whether the Kurds reached southern Syria as military settlers or as migratory tribes facilitated by alliances with Arab *foederati*.

Medieval Arabic legends that trace ancestry of Kurds back to Arabs or describe their conflicts with Ghassanids, or the legends that locate their original homeland in southern Syria, should not be dismissed simply as literary inventions. Rather, they probably preserve folk memories of historical interactions between the two peoples, reshaped over time into legends.

Cite this paper

Hemdad Arwandi, "The Monasteries of the Kurds in Syria in the Letter of the Archimandrites of Arabia, c. 570 CE", *Kurdistan Center for Iranian Studies* (Erbil, January 13, 2026), 1-16.

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[59] Jacob Ashkenazi, "Constructing Monastic Landscapes of Southern Syria in Late Antiquity: Text and Context in the Letter of the Archimandrites of Arabia," *54th International Conference of ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies: Melkite Christianity*, Oriental Institute, Oxford, 2023, 13.

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